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How Industrial Chemical Regulation Failed West Virginia

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (Audio Link) On Jan. 9, people in and around Charleston, W. Va., began showing up at hospitals: They had nausea, eye infections and some were vomiting. It was later discovered that around 10,000 gallons of toxic chemicals had leaked into the Elk River, just upstream from a water treatment plant that serves 300,000 people. Citizens were told not to drink or bathe in the water, and while some people are now using water from their taps, many still don't trust it or the information coming from public officials. *Charleston Gazette* reporter Ken Ward tells *Fresh Air's* Dave Davies that the spill included "a chemical called crude , which was sold by a company called Freedom Industries — sold to coal companies for use in the process of cleaning and washing the impurities out of coal before they ship that coal to market." For Ward, the episode is far more than the story of an accident and a cleanup: Ward says the spill and the sometimes confusing information authorities have provided about the risks to citizens reflect long-standing regulatory failures in West Virginia and across the nation. Ward is an award-winning investigative reporter who has been covering West Virginia energy and environmental issues for *The Charleston Gazette* for years.